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Nicaragua 'Secret War' Raises Unease in CIA

First of two articles

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It began with Sunday afternoon training in the Everglades, political klatches in Miami condominiums and stealthy raids by former Nicaraguan National Guard officers determined to rid Nicaragua of its new Sandinista rulers.

Three years and more than $80 million later, the anti-Sandinista rebel movement has grown into a serious war pursued by thousands of guerrillas in the mountains of their Central American homeland. Because money and advice from the Central Intelligence Agency was responsible for much of the transformation, the rebellion also has become an important item on the agenda for President Reagan's second term in office.

NEWS ANALYSIS

The Reagan administration currently is wrestling with the question of renewing official U.S. support for the supposedly covert war, which has become increasingly overt in part because the administration has helped publicize some aspects of the operation in an evident effort to intimidate the Sandinistas and their Cuban supporters.

This, as well as the general conduct of the war, have produced a sense of unease within the CIA. Moreover, the debate around the agency's role in the conflict intensified this month when members of the House intelligence committee criticized it for exercising "extremely poor management" in running the program against Nicaragua.

That criticism, which centered on the production and distribution of a psychological warfare training manual for the *contras*, as the rebels are known, was a public echo of a growing chorus of similar criticisms and doubts about the agency's performance by intelligence professionals, U.S. military personnel and foreign service officers with firsthand knowledge of the effort to undermine the Marxist-led Nicaraguan government.

Controversy surrounding the management of the covert war has brought a renewed sense of vulnerability within the agency after a period of relative calm in which many there felt the CIA had won a hard-fought battle to regain an apolitical and professional image, according to intelligence professionals.

The debate also has left the contras, the men who do the fighting against the Sandinistas, fearful about being dumped by the United States in the way Cuban exiles, Kurdish mountain warriors and Angolan rebels have all felt they were abandoned over the past two decades when they became politically inconvenient for the United States. The contras and their concerns will be examined in a second article Monday.

"Casey's war"

"If you're going to overthrow anybody you have to do it pretty quickly," said one CIA veteran of Nicaragua's "secret war." "These operations always unravel—unless they take over the country—and they always make a mess."

While Congress comes in for some criticism, many intelligence professionals point fingers at Director of Central Intelligence William J. Casey.

"It's really Casey's war," one of them said.

Like other critics who have been involved in the operation, he spoke on condition that he not be identified. But David Atlee Phillips, a founder of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers and the CIA's Latin America division chief in the early 1970s, said that their general concerns are shared by a large part of the intelligence community.

Phillips said there is no consensus, but "a significant portion of the intelligence community would be just as happy to see secret wars that aren't really secret go away."

"It was the president's judgment that it was in the United States' interest to do it," said one senior intelligence official defending Casey's role in the operation. "Somebody's got to look at the national interest, not just CIA's interest. And when the president and the administration tell you to march, you march, after having had your say."

But much of the criticism of Casey centers on how he used his say. Casey is both CIA director and a personal confidant of President Reagan. He came to his present position after serving as Reagan's campaign manager in 1980.

With such credentials, Casey's critics in the intelligence community contend he was in a good position to defend his bureaucracy from ill-conceived administration policies.

Instead, Casey is said to have embraced and defended a paramilitary program pursuing the vague, protracted goal of "pressuring" the Sandinistas.

"It was nickel and dime," said one diplomat, speaking of the program as a whole and voicing a complaint that seems almost universal among those people who worked with it. If it was going to be done, "it should have been serious from the beginning. We should have put $100 million into it at the start, not $19 million," the first amount Reagan authorized in late 1981. "We should have pushed hard instead of drawing it out. But it was hubris; we were going to knock off these little brown people on the cheap."

When asked for comment, CIA spokesman George Lauder said the agency was not giving briefings on Central American questions at this time. After a point-by-point review of the criticisms raised in this article, Lauder said that "none of the senior officers of the agency share the views of the anonymous critics. Moreover, last week in the agency's auditorium, Mr. Casey addressed an overflowing audience of employes on such matters and received a standing ovation."

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